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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE AND IPA; NSC FOR SHAPIRO/KUMAR

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SUBJECT: PALESTINIAN PARLIAMENTARIAN MUSTAFA AL-BARGHUTI ON ELECTIONS, FATAH-HAMAS RECONCILIATION, AND NEGOTIATIONS

Classified By: CG Daniel Rubinstein, per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Mustafa Barghuti, who was elected to the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) in 2006 as the head of the Independent Palestine list, believes that PLC and presidential elections need to occur in the upcoming year in order to preserve the Palestinian democratic experience and stave off fundamentalism in the region. He admitted that elections are unlikely to occur before Fatah and Hamas accept a reconciliation agreement, which he speculated is unlikely in the near term because the parties are focused on their own interests. Barghuti said that President Abbas (Abu Mazen) cannot return to negotiations if the Israelis continue presenting only "bad options." Barghuti said he is not considering running for president in future elections because he is unlikely to win. End Summary.

BARGHUTI: ELECTIONS NEEDED FOR PALESTINIAN, REGIONAL STABILITY

¶12. (C) Mustafa Barghuti, PLC member, head of the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees, and 2005 PA presidential candidate, told PolChief on December 22 that elections need to occur soon in the Palestinian territories to bolster the Palestinian democratic experience and prevent a return to corruption in the PA. He asserted that the 2006 PLC elections were a model for other Arab states to follow to increased stability in the Middle East. Barghuti said he hopes to see new elections in the next year, but that June 2010 is unrealistic because the parties require nine to twelve months to prepare for elections. He also recognized that the issue of intra-Palestinian reconciliation will delay elections until Fatah and Hamas are both ready to move forward.

HAMAS, FATAH FOCUSED INTERNALLY, UNABLE TO RECONCILE AND MOVE FORWARD

¶13. (C) Barghuti said Palestinian reconciliation is currently "on hold" because Fatah and Hamas are waiting for other issues to play out and strengthen their respective positions. Hamas, he said, is focused on negotiations over the exchange of Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit for roughly 1000 Palestinians held in Israeli prisons. Having served as a mediator in the intra-Palestinian reconciliation talks, Barghuti said he came to appreciate Hamas's ability to deliver a unified message, in spite of heated debates among Hamas officials while deciding policy. In spite of Hamas's good PR, he said, the group has governed Gaza poorly and cannot expect to win a majority in future elections.

¶14. (C) Barghuti, who is a distant relative of imprisoned FCC member Marwan Barghuti, said Fatah's recently-elected leaders are still dealing with their new positions, and trying to find a way to get back to negotiations. He said the group is

unprepared for national elections, and needs to work with other moderate Palestinian parties to combat Hamas's extremist message. Fatah had staked its reputation on the success of negotiations, Barghuti said, and needs to show the Palestinians a workable formula for peace -- or else risk losing popular support. Barghuti asked rhetorically whether the international community would work with the Palestinians on a reconciliation agreement, and encouraged the USG to weigh the possible benefits before ruling this out.

NEGOTIATIONS REQUIRE SETTLEMENT
FREEZE; I WON'T RUN JUST TO RUN

¶5. (C) Barghuti said that Abu Mazen cannot return to negotiations without a full settlement freeze, which would indicate genuine Israeli commitment to the two-state solution. He said Palestinians cannot move forward toward peace if they "have only bad options" to choose from. When asked about his own political prospects, Barghuti said he probably will not run for president in future elections. "The first time, I didn't expect to win, but I ran (for president) to position a new movement. And I was successful. I would only run a second time if I expected to win -- which I don't -- so I don't think it's worth running."

RUBINSTEIN